Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date: December 9, 2016

Present: Nelson Baker (Green Mountain United Way), Meg Burmeister (Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging), Dixie Burns (Vermont 2-1-1), Gary Chester (SASH - Rural Edge), Jane Edwards (Upper Kingdom Food Access), Joanne Fedele (North Country Hospital), Maire Folan (Green Mountain Farm to School), Beth Hetzelt (Vermont Department of Health), Senator Jane Kitchel (Vermont State Senate), Tawnya Kristen (Green Mountain United Way), Lallie Mambourg (Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging), Mikayla McAlister (SASH - Rural Edge), Danielle Merchant (SASH - Rural Edge), Jenny Nelson (Office of Senator Sanders), Susan Ohlidal (Caledonia - So. Essex Accountable Health Community), Helen Pike (Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging), Helen Reid (Vermont Department of Health), Laural Ruggles (Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital), Kelly Stoddard-Poor (AARP - Vermont), Rep. Kitty Toll (Vermont State House of Representatives), Elizabeth Trail (Barton Chronicle), Rep. Chip Troiano (Vermont State House of Representatives)

Chair: Colleen Moore de Ortiz (Vermont Department of Health) and Jeff Pierpont (Passumpsic Savings Bank)

Hunger Free Vermont staff: Drake Turner and Jenna Banning

Welcome & Introductions
Brief introductions from Council members and guests. Attendees shared updates about what they and their organizations have been working on related to hunger and nutrition.

Jenna Banning (Hunger Free Vermont) - Jenna shared a number of updates from Hunger Free Vermont:

- Rebecca Mitchell, who has been working with Green Mountain Farm to School, has been hired as Hunger Free Vermont’s new Child Nutrition Initiatives Specialist and will be starting in January.
- The Vermont Farm to School Network is gearing up for the coming legislative session and gathering grassroots support for expanding the Farm to School grants. Jenna passed around cards and asked Council members to sign on in support of expanding the Farm to School grant. These cards were collected and will be sent to local state legislators in January.
- As was discussed in the September Council meeting, the Hunger Councils of Vermont will be sending letters of introduction to the incoming Scott Administration and State Senators and Representatives. These letters will be drafted by Hunger Free Vermont and the Co-Chairs of each Hunger Council, and then will be sent to all Council members, at which point Council members will have the opportunity to raise any major concerns or opt-out if they or their organization have advocacy restrictions. The letters will be generalized (not asking for specific actions or issues), and focus on inviting the legislature and administration to work with the Hunger Council network. Jenna thanked Senators Kitchel and Starr and Representatives Toll and Troiano for their involvement with the Hunger Council of the Northeast Kingdom already.

Action Steps & Handouts:
Action: Go to http://vermontfarmtoschool.org/2017-farm-school-campaign to sign on in support of expanding the Farm to School grant in Vermont.
### 3-4-50 and Health Messaging

Fifty percent of deaths in Vermont are caused by three things: a lack of physical activity, tobacco use, and a poor diet. The Vermont Department of Health has created a campaign to help communicate these important connections in the community.

Colleen Moore de Ortiz (Vermont Department of Health) - The Vermont Department of Health has created an outreach campaign focused on highlighting the connection between individual behaviors and long-term health effects. 3-4-50 represents the “3” behaviors (smoking, lack of physical activity, and poor nutrition) that cause “4” diseases (heart disease and stroke, Type 2 Diabetes, cancer, and lung disease), that lead to “50” percent or more of deaths in the State. Recognizing how difficult it can be to talk about public health clearly and effectively, the 3-4-50 campaign provides tools and data with which to frame conversations and work.

Colleen shared data from both service areas in the Northeast Kingdom (Newport and St. Johnsbury), including a document highlighting the challenges facing older Vermonters. (See attached)

### Hunger and Other Challenges Facing Seniors in the Northeast Kingdom

Access to adequate and nutritious food is one of many issues facing seniors in Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties. Representatives from local organizations shared an overview of the services available to seniors in the region, as well as what they see in terms of food insecurity and the strength of the safety net.

Jeff Pierpont and Drake Turner highlighted the importance of focusing on seniors. The senior population is growing in Vermont, and according to recent data, is the only population to be seeing an increase in the rates of food insecurity, which is very worrying. Jeff introduced the speakers:

- Kelly Stoddard Poor from AARP - Vermont
- Lallie Mambourg and Meg Burmeister from the Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging
- Gary Chester, Mikayla McAlister, and Danielle Merchant from SASH (Support and Services at Home)

Kelly Stoddard Poor (AARP) - Kelly is the Outreach Director for AARP-Vermont and shared an overview of national trends in senior hunger, and what is happening in Vermont. (see attached powerpoint) By 2020, 21% of the United States will be over 65 years old, representing a major demographic shift in the country and the importance of focusing on meeting the needs of this population. How a person experiences food insecurity can depend on their age, and Kelly shared that while all age groups experienced an increase in food insecurity during and following the Great Recession, the steepest increase was for people between the ages of 40 and 49.

Kelly and Drake shared that only one-third of eligible seniors are participating in the 3SquaresVT program, which is the lowest level in the state. They described some of the barriers to enrollment for seniors, including stigma, uncertainty about eligibility, and the difficulty in applying for and maintaining 3SquaresVT benefits. Kelly advised that outreach efforts focus on the population in greatest need: grandparents raising grandchildren and older Vermonters with disabilities.
Gary Chester (SASH / Rural Edge) - Gary is a Coordinator for SASH (Support and Services at Home) with Rural Edge, an affordable housing organization operating across the Northeast Kingdom. SASH is active across the state, and helps connect seniors, both in housing sites and living independently, with the services they need.

Gary shared some of the challenges to food security he is seeing with his clients, including a lack of interest in fresh produce.

The Council discussed some of the barriers to using fresh produce, including dexterity, mobility, vision, cost, and lack of interest in cooking for one person. In addition the paperwork challenges of applying for and maintaining 3SquaresVT benefits, Danielle Merchant from SASH also described the technological and memory challenges some senior encounter with their EBT card. When everyone in a household is 65 or older, they can receive their benefits in the form of cash, which they access through an EBT debit card, but some struggle to use the card at stores. The Council also discussed how this money may be used to address other basic needs (such as housing or medicine), which limits the amount of money used for food, which is often the most flexible part of a budget.

The Council also discussed the challenges in access to food. Kelly Stoddard Poor shared that 1 in 5 adults over 65 years old no longer drives, which has a significant effect on access to food, especially in the rural areas of Vermont. Gary Chester described the AARP’s Walk About Town project, which highlighted how things we take for granted, like sidewalk curbs, can be major barriers to seniors’ mobility.

Lallie Mambourg and Meg Burmeister (Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging) - Lallie is the Nutrition Coordinator and Meg is the Executive Director for the Council on Aging, which coordinates the Meals on Wheels program and other programs for seniors in the region.

The NEK Council on Aging contracts with 16 community meal providers, a few of which are also able to offer Meals on Wheels. In the past year, approximately 183,000 meals were served to 42,000 people, mostly in the community dining rooms (approximately 38,000 people) with the remainder going out via the Meals on Wheels delivery program. These are the second highest numbers in the state (second to CVAA, which covers Addison, Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle Counties), and Lallie emphasized that there is a lot of hunger in the senior population in the Northeast Kingdom.

The Council discussed the importance of collecting and sharing these statistics when advocating for more support for seniors and senior-serving programs. Members suggested looking at the percent of the population being served (instead of just the overall number) and collecting information from the region’s food shelves on how many seniors they are serving.

These food programs are largely funded and regulated by the Older Americans Act, which has been level funded for the past 5 years. This presents a real struggle for funding, and has forced the Council on Aging to make some hard decisions. While demand is high and meal providers would like to be able to offer more meals, there is a defined amount that the Council on Aging can reimburse for, which is leading to some cuts in how many days meals can be offered. The Council on Aging is working hard to avoid having a wait list, but they are already worried that the reduction in days in which meals are offered is leading to some people going hungry. The
Council is starting to collect information on the level of food insecurity facing its clients. If the Council is ever facing having to implement a wait list, it will be able to use this information to prioritize which clients most need the food assistance, but both Lallie and Meg emphasized that they do not want to face this situation.

Under the Older Americans Act, no one 60 years old or older can be charged for a meal (although they can make a suggested donation of $3.00), but Lallie shared that there are people who would like to pay, but cannot afford to. Some other challenges facing seniors are transportation and mobility. The Council is working with RCT (Rural Community Transportation) and Lallie applauded the work of RSVP’s coordinator, who is very effective in recruiting and coordinating volunteers to help.

The Council discussed the potential of supporting home deliveries of groceries, which is happening at some stores and can be helpful for seniors and others with mobility issues. However, Gary Chester has heard that this can be challenging for the store, and suggested that enlisting volunteers to help with this process could be helpful. Council members discussed the challenges of the region’s widely dispersed residential patterns, which can pose barriers of providing services at scale, and the lack of affordable housing options for seniors that would help create centralized locations. Council members suggested enlisting the medical community in helping refer and encourage people at risk of food insecurity and other health problems to access services, and Colleen Moore de Ortiz and Laural Ruggles described the 2-item food insecurity screen being implemented at the hospitals in Newport and St. Johnsbury to identify patients with food insecurity and connect them with resources. Jane Edwards has been working with North County Hospital, and is hopeful that they will be using the food resource directory.

Lallie is a strong advocate for the 3SquaresVT program, and sends out the income guidelines for the program along with the Meals on Wheels brochure in order to ‘catch’ people who may need the assistance at the earliest stage possible. Lallie was an outreach worker for 3SquaresVT in the past and helped advocate for the “cash benefit” - if everyone in a household is 65 years or older, they can receive their 3SquaresVT benefits as cash deposited into their bank accounts.

Senator Kitchel, Dixie Burns, Drake Turner, and other Council members discussed the complexities of determining a “household” for 3SquaresVT and other assistance programs, which Dixie has seen prevent some seniors from enrolling in 3SquaresVT. The Council discussed the high cost of living in Vermont, which is exacerbated by age for many. Rep. Troiano and Senator Kitchel described H.730, a bill put forward last year that would ease the financial burden on Meals on Wheels programs by allowing seniors who are homebound to use their Medicaid funds to pay for meals. This bill was not able to be taken up by the end of the session, but Jenna Banning and Drake Turner shared that the Area Agencies on Aging across Vermont will be taking it up again this session.

The Council discussed some of the potential effects of the All Payer model for medical insurance, which could affect funding for SASH and the Blueprint for Health.

Drake Turner shared an update of nutrition funding at the federal and state level. In terms of Older Americans Act funding, while it would be good to see an increase in its funding, Vermont would only see a small increase because of the small size of our state’s population. As the senior population is
increasing in Vermont and the rate of food insecurity for this population is increasing, Drake emphasized the importance of the 3SquaresVT program, which, while not perfect, is at least able to expand with need and can be a valuable resource. Hunger Free Vermont is focused on protecting the 3SquaresVT program over the coming years, and is thankful for our Congressional delegates at the federal level for their support.

Drake and Senator Kitchel shared that there is rising interest at the federal level to pass the Farm Bill in the next year. SNAP (called 3SquaresVT in Vermont) funding is included in the Farm Bill, which many Congressional legislators see as welfare and an anomaly. There is talk of trying to pass the Farm Bill in the coming year, and Drake encouraged Council members to be strong positive advocates for supporting the SNAP program in the face of many myths and efforts to demonize SNAP recipients.

Council members discussed the economic benefits that the SNAP program brings to Vermont as a whole, which can be a powerful argument in support of the program. Colleen Moore de Ortiz shared that the Council will be focusing on the 3SquaresVT program at a future meeting and bringing food retailers to the table, and Drake agreed that retailers can be powerful allies.

Susan Ohlidal, Laural Ruggles, Meg Burmeister, and Tawnya Kristen described some of the work being done by the Caledonia - So. Essex Accountable Health Community to help increase enrollment in 3SquaresVT. The group agrees with and has encountered all of the barriers to enrollment and continued participation in the 3SquaresVT program that were stated during this meeting, and is hoping to learn from the partners in the Council and across the Northeast Kingdom on strategies to use to meet this goal. The Council discussed the importance of including the experiences of those facing these challenges at the individual level and tailoring services to meet needs in the setting and methods in which they’re preferred. As an example, Meg Burmeister shared that in order to combat the problem of social isolation among seniors, the Council on Aging working in Chittenden County operates a restaurant voucher program, and the NEK Council on Aging is starting to think about implementing this in some of the region’s more densely populated areas.

The Council discussed some of the challenges facing the region’s food shelves in meeting the food and nutritional needs of its clients, particularly senior clients. Susan Ohlidal and others emphasized the importance of using models that allow clients to choose what foods they receive from the shelves, and encouraging partnerships among food shelves and other local organizations. Council members expressed concern about the nutritional quality of foods available at food shelves and pantries and the complexity of the emergency and charitable food system as a whole, which is increasingly being looked to as a community resource instead of an emergency resource.

Wrap Up & Final Announcements

Jeff Pierpont - Jeff shared that due to funding challenges, the Council on Aging was no longer going to be able to offer “Blizzard Boxes,” which are boxes of food sent out to Meals on Wheels participants in advance of storms. Passumpsic Savings Bank will be taking care of this program this year as part of its community service project for all of its employees. The Council applauded Passumpsic Savings Bank for this support and great action.

Jeff and Colleen thanked everyone for attending.

Handout: Healthy Foods Donation Guide (developed by the Healthy Harvest Network, a partnership of 7 food shelves and the Hunger Council of the Windham Region) (attached)
Next Meeting: February 3rd, 2017; Barton Senior Center / Memorial Hall, Barton, VT